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Affirmation

United Methodists for Lesbian, Gay & Bisexual Concerns

Winter 1995 Volume 20 Number 4

Affirmation Gathers in Southeast

Grant Park Aldersgate United Methodist Church in Atlanta, GA (a Reconciling Congregation) was recently host to the **Southeast Regional Gathering of Affirmation.** The group assembled Friday night October 20th for dinner and an evening of getting acquainted.

Saturday, October 21st, Ms. Ginnie Hart (member of St. Mark United Methodist Church in Atlanta) led two extended sessions on the Bible and Homosexuality. Her leadership was outstanding and deeply appreciated She highlighted, especially, the importance of inductive Bible study and the change it makes in the traditional interpretation of those scriptures most often used to bash lesbians, gays and bisexuals. The tools she recommended in particular for this kind of Bible study are Harper's *Bible Dictionary* and *Bible Commentary.* In addition, she noted that scholars are currently recommending *What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality*

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Youth Organization to Ask for Name Change; and Discipline Change on Homosexuality

SALT LAKE CITY (UMNS) -- United Methodist youth attending the biennial legislative meeting of the National Youth Ministry Organization (NYMO) here Aug. 7-10 voted to ask the denomination's top law-making assembly to change the group's name.

The 215 delegates here submitted legislation requesting the 1996 General Conference change it's name to The United Methodist General Youth Ministry Organization.

The purpose of NYMO, composed of youth between 12 and 18, is to identify the needs and concerns of youth and interpret their visions for the church. The group also seeks to empower teens to become leaders in the United Methodist Church and to determine what projects will be supported by the Youth Service Fund. The money is raised by youth for projects and programs that benefit youth.

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"Youth" from page one

> The youth are asking. . .drop. . . prohibitions against ordaining or appointing "self -avowed practicing homosexuals"

After much back-and-forth discussion on what the scriptures and the church say about homosexuality, convocation participants agreed to submit legislative resolutions calling for changes in the book of Discipline. The youth are also requesting further study of homosexuality in local churches.

A petition, approved early in the meeting, asked that homosexuals be allowed to serve in the military and called on the United Methodist Church "to be an advocate for equal civil rights for all marginalized groups, including homosexuals."

Later in the meeting action was taken on changing the language of the Discipline.

> "If the church doesn't address the issue now, then the church will. . . when we (the youth) become delegates to General Conference"

Jeremy Beck, vice president of the Central Texas Conference Council on Youth Ministry, objected to a statement in the church's Social Principles (Par. 71F) which says "we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice to be incompatible with Christian teaching."

That phrase, he argued, "softens the affirmation" earlier in the paragraph which says "Homosexual persons no less than heterosexual persons are individuals of sacred worth. All persons need the ministry and guidance of the church"

The Social Principles also support basic human rights and civil liberties for all people, including homosexuals.

Proposed by youth from the South Central Jurisdiction, the petition approved here calls on General Conference delegates to replace the "incompatibility" sentence in the Discipline with the statement: "We affirm that God's grace is available to all."

The youth are asking that the delegates drop from the Book of Discipline prohibitions against ordaining or appointing "self-avowed practicing homosexuals (Par. 402.2)." They also propose dropping a paragraph which prohibits the use of church funds by a "gay" caucus or to "promote the acceptance of homosexuality" (Par. 906.12)

Beck said the current Disciplinary language discriminates against homosexuals who desire ordination. "We do not really know if homosexuality is sin," he said. "Homosexuals deserve the same rights and privileges as others. I believe that all people have the right to God's grace."

"I have a friend who is a homosexual and if my friend feels called to the ministry, like I have been, why can't my friend serve," he asked.

Pushing for action in 1996, Beck said, "If the church doesn't address the issue now, then the church will address it when we (the youth) become delegates to General Conference."

A church wide study of homosexuality was conducted during the 1988-92 quadrennium and were referred to local churches for study by the 1992 General Conference. NYMO is asking that the study be continued beyond 1996 "to educate and to discourage myths."

According to Kevin Maguire, president of the Little Rock Conference Youth Council, myths about homosexuals suggest they are dirty and nasty, sexually active and molesters.

Youth groups and adults who work with youth need to be taught the facts, he declared. "Youth need to be educated. Knowledge is power and to put the power in the hands of the youth is to put the future in our hands."

Funds are needed for Our Presence at General Conference! Please send your donation to: *Affirmation, P.O. Box 1021, Evanston, IL 60204.*

"Gathering" from page one

by Helminiak, as the new book that summarizes the work of previous outstanding authors and states clearly the best thinking of our time.

Also on Saturday two members of Affirmation's National Council led a session on the history of Affirmation, its purpose, current structure and resources for individuals and local groups. The nature and content of Affirmation's presence at General Conference was reviewed and discussed. Also reviewed was Affirmation's role in birthing the Reconciling Congregation Program.

The Rev. Rick Wright, of Atlanta, and Mark Wilson, southeast regional representative to the National Council of Affirmation from Alabama, prepared a very helpful resource table of materials for participants.

Saturday evening was a time of enjoying Atlanta. The weekend ended with Church School and Worship, some of the group at Grant Park Aldersgate UMC and some at St. Mark UMC. We thank them for their hospitality and look forward to more regional gatherings and to Robert Bryant and Mark Wilson, National Council members in the southeast who coordinated the planning and local arrangements.

PLEASE NOTE

National Affirmation will hold the Spring Meeting in Denver
Saturday, April 13 and Sunday, April 14
just prior to General Conference which starts Tuesday, April 16

Mark your calendar NOW and plan to attend!

Elections for Council Members will take place at this meeting!
Send Names for Nomination to:
Nominations, National Affirmation
P.O. Box 1021
Evanston, IL 60204

LOCAL NEWS FROM AROUND THE COUNTRY

Dallas Affirmation At the July General Meeting the group held a song fest of hymns and religious music. There was also a collection of donations for the AIDS Resource Food Pantry as part of their service project. In September, John Thornburg led the group in study and reflection on Bible verses from Luke concerning "Homecoming". In October members put on their boots and plaid shirts to go horseback riding at Jolabec. Lake Murray will be the location of the annual camping expedition, the weekend of November 17 through 19. The group usually meets every fourth Monday at 7:00 pm, at Northaven UMC, 11211 Preston Road at Northaven Road. The Third Sunday Lunches are regular gatherings of Affirmation members and their friends. For additional information write to [redacted], Dallas, Texas [redacted].

Affirmation Los Angeles attended worship at St. Paul's UMC in Redondo Beach followed by a pool party at the end of July. Affirmation/Los Angeles was mentioned in "Friends" a newsletter serving the gay and lesbian community in Bakersfield. The September meeting was led by Rev. Sandie Richards of Ocean Park UMC. Affirmation Los Angeles meets the second Sunday of each month for programs, worship, refreshments and fellowship at Holman UMC at 7:00 p.m. For more information write to [redacted], West Hollywood, CA [redacted] or call [redacted].

Nashville Affirmation In July, the group meet to eat and visit. Diana Chalfant shared her experience at the Reconciling Congregations meeting held in Minneapolis during the August meeting. October promises to be an evening of good food and conversation. Nashville Affirmation meets monthly for a potluck and a time of fellowship at Edgewood UMC, 1502 Edgehill Avenue. For information about monthly meetings and other activities write to Affirmation, P.O. Box 24213, Nashville, TN 37202.

Austin Affirmation The Austin Chapter has agreed to host this Fall's Regional Affirmation Meeting, November 10 through 12. The topics currently planned are "Racial Inclusivity" and "Our Presence at General Conference". The meeting is open to anyone who wishes to attend. For more information contact Richard at [redacted].

Shalom Ministries held a dinner and auction October 21, at First UMC in Portland. Shalom Ministries needs volunteers to assist with its expanding programs. There are a variety of support groups are held throughout the week by Shalom Ministries. For more information about Shalom Ministries write to P.O. Box 66147, Portland, OR 97266 or call [redacted].

If your group was not mentioned in this issue, it's because I haven't heard from you. Please send a copy of your Newsletter or information about how, when and where your group meets . Be sure to include a contact person, address or phone number. You can send all information to Fritz Schultz, [redacted] San Francisco, CA [redacted] Phone [redacted].

"Decent, civil and humane"

Elizabeth Birch, Executive Director of the *Human Rights Campaign Fund*, writes to the members of the Christian Coalition:

An Open Letter was not my first choice as a way of reaching you. I would have preferred speaking to all of you directly, and in a setting where you would be most comfortable.

That was my motivation, some weeks ago, when I asked your executive director, Ralph Reed, for the opportunity to address the Christian Coalition's "Road to Victory" Conference. It is still my motivation today And it is supported by a single, strong belief that the time has come for us to speak to each other rather than past each other.

It took Mr. Reed very little time to reject my request. Perhaps he misunderstood my motivation. But I can assure you that what has driven my request is this: I believe in the power of the word and the value of honest communication. During my years of work as a litigator at a major corporation, I was often amazed at what simple, fresh and truthful conversation could accomplish. And what is true in the corporate setting is also true, I'm convinced, in our communities. If we could learn to speak and listen to each other with integrity, the consequences might shock us.

"What's more, there are hundreds of thousands of Christians among us..."

Although your podium was not available to me, I am grateful for those who have come today and will give me "the benefit of the doubt" and be willing to consider what I have to say. I will be pleased if you are able to hear me without prejudging either the message or the messenger. And I will be hopeful, most of all, if you respond by joining me in finding new ways to speak with honesty not only about one another, but also to one another.

If I am confident in anything at all, it is this: our communities have more in common than we care to imagine. This is not to deny the many differences. But out of our sheer humanity comes some common ground.

Although the stereotype would have us believe otherwise, there are many conservative Americans within the nation's gay and lesbian communities.

What's more, there are hundreds of thousands of Christians among us--Christians of all traditions, including those represented in the Christian Coalition.

And, like it or not, we are part of your family. And you are part of our community. We are neighbors and colleagues, business associates and friends. More intimately still, you are fathers of sons who are gay and mothers of daughters who are lesbians. I know many of your children very, very well. I work with them. I worry with them. And I rejoice that they are part of our community.

Part of what I want you to know is that many of your children who are gay and lesbian are gifted and strong. Some are famous; most of them are not. But many are heroic in the way they have conquered barriers to their own self-respect and the courage with which they've set out to serve a higher good. All were created by God. And you have every right to be proud of each of them.

I begin by noting the worthiness of the gays and lesbians in your family and our community for a reason: it's hard to communicate with people we do not respect. And the character of prejudice, of stereotype, of demagoguery, is to tear down the respect others might otherwise enjoy in public, even the respect they would hold for themselves in private. By taking away respectability, rhetorically as well as legally, we justify the belief that they are not quite human, not quite worthy, not quite deserving of our time, or our attention, or our concern.

And that is, sadly, what many of your children and colleagues and neighbors who are gay and lesbian have feared is the intent of the Christian Coalition. If it were true, of course, it would be not only regrettable, but terribly hypocritical; it would not be worthy of the true ideals and values based in love at the core of what we call "Christian."

The reason I have launched this conversation is to ask that you join me in a common demonstration that this is not true. I make my appeal as an individual, as Elizabeth Birch, and also as the executive director of the Human Rights Campaign Fund, America's largest policy organization for gay men and lesbian women.

This is such a basic appeal -- to human communication and common decency -- that I do not even know how to distinguish between what is personal and what is professional. But my appeal

General Conference Housing Reservations

for

Affirmation: United Methodists for Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual Concerns

Methodist Federation for Social Action

Reconciling Congregation Program

Women's Caucus

These four United Methodist groups are sharing meeting and hospitality space during the 1996 General Conference in Denver at the Holiday Inn-Downtown (two blocks from the conference site). Housing for volunteers is also being reserved cooperatively. Volunteers participating in the witnesses of any of these groups should use this form for requesting housing reservations. If you have questions, call [redacted]

VOLUNTEER NAME _____ DAYTIME PHONE (____)_____

ADDRESS _____ CITY/STATE/ZIP_____

I will be volunteering with (check all that apply):

____ Affirmation ____ RCP

____ MFSA ____ Women's Caucus

Please reserve housing for me for these nights:

__Mon. 4/15 __Tues.4/16 __Wed. 4/17 __Thurs.4/18 __Fri. 4/19 __Sat. 4/20 __Sun. 4/21

__Mon. 4/22 __Tues.4/23 __Wed. 4/24 __Thurs.4/25 __Fri. 4/26 __Sat. 4/27

I prefer this housing option:

1) HOLIDAY INN 1450 Glenarm Place (headquarters)

____ single room @ $72 CHECK: __single-king OR __double-double

____ share with 1 person @ $36 each CHECK: __single-king OR __double-double

____ share with 3 persons @ $18 each (two double beds)

2) RAMADA INN CAPITOL HILL 1150 E. Colfax (20 blocks from convention center)

____ single room @ $54 CHECK: __single-king OR __double-double

____ share with 1 person @ $27 each CHECK: __single-king OR __double-double

____ share with 3 persons @ $13.50 each (two double beds)

3) HOUSING IN SOMEONE'S HOME (as available)

____ I would prefer housing in someone's home, recognizing that I will be responsible for providing my own local transportation.

Here are my other housing preferences:

ROOMMATE(S): _____

If not indicated, you will be assigned roommate(s) per housing option requested.

____ NONSMOKING ROOM or ____ SMOKING ROOM

OTHER SPECIAL NEEDS: _____

Here is payment for my housing: ____ (nights) X $ ____ (rate) = $_____ (total cost)

___Enclosed is my check (payable to Reconciling Congregation Program).

OR ___Charge $_____ to my VISA/MASTERCARD #_____

Expiration ____/____ Signature _____

NOTE: Housing is limited so make your reservation early. Include payment for at least three nights. Payment in full must be received by March 1, 1996--the deadline for housing reservations.

RETURN TO: Reconciling Congregation Program, 3801 N. Keeler Avenue, Chicago, IL 60641

OR FAX TO: [redacted]

is sincere. I am convinced that if we cannot find ways to respect one another as human beings, and therefore to respect one another's rights, we will do great damage not only to each other, but also to those we say we represent.

I recognize that it is not easy for us to speak charitably to each other. I have read fund-raising letters in which people like me are assigned labels which summon up the ugliest of dehumanizing stereotypes. Anonymous writers have hidden under the title of "Concerned Christian" to condemn me with the fire of God and to call on all of you to deny me an equal opportunity to participate in the whole range of American life. I have heard of political agendas calling not merely for the defeat of those I represent, but for our eradication.

"any Christian who slanders us in the name of God has failed the ideals of Scripture."

Such expressions of hatred do not, can not, beget a spirit of trust. Nor do they pass the test of either truthfulness or courage. They bear false witness in boldface type. And I believe that they must embarrass those who, like me, heard of another gospel -- even the simple gospel taught me as a child in Sunday School.

I would not ask that you, as members of a Christian group, or as supporters of a conservative political cause, set aside either your basic beliefs or your historic commitment. The church which many of your represent -- Baptist, for example, and Pentecostal -- were also the churches I attended as a young woman. In those days, I heard sermons about justice and sang songs about forgiveness. My greatest hope is not that you will give up your faith, but that it will work among all of us.

Neither of us should forsake our fundamental convictions. But we could hold those convitions with a humility that allows room for the lives of others; neither of us may be the sole possessors of truth on every given issue. And we could express our convictions in words that are, if not affectionate, and if not even kind, then at least decent, civil, humane. We need not demonize each other simply because we disagree.

I came to my task in the campaign for human rights with this conviction: if we, in the name of civil rights, slander you, we have failed our own ideals, as surely as any Christian who slanders us in the name of God has failed the ideals of Scripture.

Some of those who asked me to serve at HRCF may believe that I am naive, that it is foolish to appeal to the "the enemy" for common decency, let alone to ask for trusting conversations. But those who wonder about my ideals may not know my childhood.

I am an American, born on American soil, but raised in Canada throughout my formative years. Even from a distance -- perhaps especially from a distance -- the American ideal and the centuries-old American dream captured my imagination and my spirit. When I saw America, I saw responsible freedom being exercised everywhere from the picket line to the voting booth. When I learned of the values rooted at the heart of the American Spirit, I felt undying hope. That hope is also rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition of this nation. From my vantage point on the Canadian prairies, the promise of America tugged at my soul. I could fight it, but I could not win, and America quite literally won my heart.

More remarkable still, all this happened during my adolescence, when we are most subject to peer pressure, and in the 1960's during the height of Canadian nationalism. It was, in those days, as daring to publicly acknowledge your love for America as it was to come out of the closet as a lesbian.

But I could not hide my affection for my homeland, even though I saw its obvious failings and shortcomings. I believed then, and I believe no less staunchly today, that no other nation in the world offers all its citizens such promises of fairness and equality, principles that are equally reflected in the Christian tradition and the American Constitution.

What surprised me when I first became active in America's gay and lesbian communities was that, in this idealism about America, I was not alone. Gay men were beaten with baseball bats, and they went off to find justice, confident that the American ideal would protect them. Lesbians were fired from their jobs, and they said to one another, "We'll be protected by the law." So keen was confidence in the American hope that it took the gay and lesbian communities decades to conclude, regretfully, that civil rights are as likely to be withheld as granted, despite the Constitution; and that true believers are as likely to engage in cruel discrimination as in compassion, even in the

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name of Christ.

Many of us in this community have a long history with the church.

Gay men I have loved deeply and lesbians I've known well have talked long into the night about their love for God and for God's church. For some of them, the church had provided the one message of hope they knew as children. The promise of good news was seized gladly by adolescents who did not understand why they were different, what that difference would mean.

For some, the deepest agony of life is not that they risk physical abuse or that they will never gain their civil rights, but that they have felt the judgment of an institution on which they staked their lives: the church. What they long for most is what they once believed was theirs as a birthright: the knowledge that they are God's children, and they can come home.

"... I appeal to you as people who passionately uphold the value of the familiy."

And it is not only those of us who are gay or lesbian who have suffered on the doorstep of some congregations. Parents, fearing what others at church might whisper, choose to deny the reality that their son is gay or their daughter is a lesbian. Brothers and sisters suffer an unhealthy, and unwarranted, and un-Christian shame. They bear a burden that cripples their faith, based on a fear that cripples us all.

This means, I think, that we are still a long way from realizing the ideal of America as a land of hope and promise, from achieving the goal of religion as a healing force that unites us, from discovering that human beings are, simply by virtue of being human beings, deserving of respect and common decency.

And so I have come today -- in person, bearing this letter, and in writing to those who will only receive it -- to make three simple, sincere appeals to those of you who are members of the Christian Coalition.

The first appeal is this: please make integrity a watchword for the campaigns you launch. We all struggle to be people of integrity, especially when we campaign for funds. But the fact that we are tempted by money is no excuse. We need to commit ourselves to a higher moral ground.

I do not know when the first direct-mail letter was issued in your name that defamed gay men and abused gay women, that described us as less than human and certainly unworthy of trust. Neither do I know when people discovered that the richest financial return came from letters that depicted gays and lesbians with intentionally dishonest images. But I do know -- and I must believe that you know too -- that this is dishonest, this is wrong.

I can hardly imagine that a money machine is being operated in your name, spinning out exaggerations as if they were truths, and that you do not see it. But perhaps you do not. In which case, I ask that you hear my second appeal: I ask that, as individuals, you talk to those of us who are gay or lesbian, rather than succumb to the temptation to either avoid us at all cost, as if we are not a part of your community, or to rant at us, as if we are not worthy of quiet conversation.

We are, all of us and those we represent, human beings. As Americans, you will have your political candidates; we will have ours. But we could, both of us, ask that our candidates speak the truth to establish their right to leadership, rather than abuse the truth in the interest of one evening's headline. We may work for different outcomes in elections, but we can engage in an ethic of basic respect and decency.

Finally, I appeal to you as people who passionately uphold the value of the family. You have brothers and sons who have not heard a word of family affection since the day they summoned the courage to tell the simple truth. You have sisters and daughters who have given up believing that you mean it when you say, "The family is the basic unit of society," or even, "God loves you and so do I."

Above all the other hopes with which I've come to you hovers this one: that some member of the Christian Coalition will call some member of the Human Rights Campaign Fund and say, "It's been a long time, son" -- or, "I'm missing you, my daughter." -- and before the conversation ends, someone will hear the heartfelt words, "Come home. Let's talk to each other."

In that hope, I appeal to each of you.

Elizabeth Birch
Executive Director
Human Rights Campaign Fund

Funds are needed for Our Presence at General Conference! Please send your donation to: *Affirmation, P.O. Box 1021, Evanston, IL 60204.*

Computer AIDS Network Offers Support without Judgment

by United Methodist News Service

When Rusty first logged onto Computerized AIDS Ministries (CAM), she was anxious to find information about the disease but worried about having to deal with a judgmental group of Christians.

But since becoming an active user of the electronic bulletin board sponsored by the United Methodist Board of Global Ministries' Health and Welfare Ministries Department, Rusty said she has dropped most of her prejudices against Protestants.

"Here, I have found clergy of the United Methodist Church who teach gently in the way of Christ . . . absent of judgment, without condemnation," she wrote in a June 14 on-line testimony. "I've also found good people of other denominations to share the best of what means the most to them."

Now, as CAM has become accessible through the Internet and World Wide Web, Rusty has contacted "hundreds of sites" to link the network to other web pages, according to the Rev. Nancy Carter, CAM's system operator.

Her volunteer work has helped open CAM to "the potential of millions more people" to read through its library of information or paticipate in forums, Carter added.

World Wide Web is a network of "home pages" on the Internet, a global network of computers. People whose computers have "web browsers" can call up CAM's home pages.

Other users who have an Internet connection can use one of two methods -- telnet or file transfer protocol (ftp) to access CAM itself.

Other United Methodist groups also are starting home pages on the Web, according to Carter, including the Board of Global Ministries.

Started in June, 1993, CAM has attracted 750 official members who are seeking medical information about AIDS; inspirational stories from those battling the disease; effective ways to minister to individuals and families affected by AIDS; and compassionate support for those in the struggle.

Users can read, for example, a poignant essay by Debbi Hood Johnson of Charlotte, N.C.. whose husband, B.J., died two years ago from complications of AIDS.

She still wears a symbolic red ribbon "to carry the message about the reality and urgency of AIDS and how HIV can be prevented. I carry this message for those whose voices can no longer be heard but whose presence can still be felt."

The anonymity of a computer network also allows some people to be more open in sharing their personal stories and concerns, according to Richard Cory of Chesapeake, Va.

Cory -- whose wife and nine-year-old son are both HIV-positive -- finds CAM one of his best sources of support. He said his contact with the United Methodist Church through the network "has changed my spiritual outlook and opened my mind and heart to Christ."

Not everyone who uses the network has had direct experience with AIDS or HIV.

The Rev. Larry Mason, of North Loup, Neb., first called the network's 800 telephone number out of curiosity. "I got started into it and found some very delightful people and lots of information that has been very helpful," he said.

Mason currently monitors CAM's Bible forum. A forum allows people to post electronic notes to each other and hold discussions. "It's amazing how much support you can get just by sharing ideas," he said.

His experience with CAM has not only broadened his knowledge about AIDS, but also helped him reach "a much deeper understanding and far more acceptance" of the gay and lesbian community, Mason said.

CAM can be accessed via computer and modem at [redacted] or [redacted], or via the Internet by ftp, telnet or World Wide Web at hwbbs.gbgm-umc.org.

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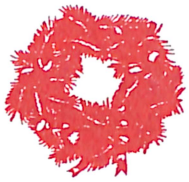
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We reserve the right to edit or reject any material submitted for publication.



Season's Greetings To All



1996 NEWSLETTER DEADLINES

DEADLINE DATE		PUBLICATION DATE
	SPRING	
February 1, 1996		March 1, 1996
	SUMMER	
May 15, 1996		June 15, 1996
	FALL	
July 10, 1996		August 10, 1996

All submissions should be sent to:
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P. O. Box 1021
Evanston, IL 60204

P.O. Box 1021
Evanston, IL 60204

TO